



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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PRESIDENT SIGNS BILL ENABLING LAND EXCHANGE FOR WILDLIFE CONSERVATION

During a special ceremony today at the White House, President Reagan signed landmark legislation authorizing the exchange of Federal lands in Nevada for privately-owned wetlands in Florida. The measure calls for the Federal Government to then sell the Florida lands to the state and use the proceeds to fund the acquisition of additional lands for two national wildlife refuges in Florida.

Secretary of the Interior Don Hodel, who was in attendance, said, "This exchange is remarkable in that it meets the needs of the private sector and those of this Nation's wildlife resources--at no cost to the American taxpayer."

Under the exchange agreement, Aerojet-General Corporation will receive title to 28,000 acres of public lands in Nevada currently managed by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management. An additional 14,000 acres of land will be leased to the firm for 99 years. In return, the Federal Government will receive approximately 4,600 acres of wetlands Aerojet owns in south Florida. The Florida land will be sold to the South Florida Water Management District for its use in managing the water resources of southeastern Florida and the Everglades.

The proceeds from that sale, estimated at \$2.4 million, then will be used by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) to buy additional lands and inholdings at the Key Deer and Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuges in Florida. The actual purchase of the lands is expected to take place during the summer since the exchange agreement contains a provision directing the Interior Secretary to conduct a current appraisal of the Nevada lands involved within 120 days of enactment.

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The Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge encompasses the lower reaches of the Suwannee River and consists of coastal marsh and riverine delta areas. The river is an important summering area for endangered manatees and is used extensively by a variety of marsh and waterbirds, particularly herons, ibis, osprey, and brown pelicans. Some of the latter inhabit large rookeries located on islands within the Cedar Keys National Wildlife Refuge to the south. The refuge also is important to wintering waterfowl, primarily redhead ducks, that use the offshore area.

Key Deer National Wildlife Refuge was authorized in 1954 to protect the endangered Key deer, a diminutive deer found only in the unique tropical habitat of the Florida Keys. The mangroves, pinelands, and hardwood hammocks also host populations of bald eagles and osprey. The exchange will permit the Service to acquire privately-owned lands within the refuge as well as some fringe tracts not yet developed for residential use.

Interior Department Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks Bill Horn said he is pleased with the opportunity afforded by the legislation to use the proceeds from this transaction to acquire much-needed wildlife habitat for the National Wildlife Refuge System. "This tri-party exchange will bolster our efforts to meet our wildlife conservation mission in Florida by adding increasingly scarce undeveloped land to two important existing refuges," he said.

Service Deputy Director Steve Robinson, who served a significant role in negotiations concerning the exchange, said, "This legislation is a classic example of innovative Federal policy in which all benefit. The State of Nevada will receive environmentally-sound development, Florida's water conservation system will realize a significant addition, and the Refuge System receives much-needed lands for the protection of endangered species."

Aerojet will use the newly-acquired lands for the development, assembly, and testing of rocket engines. The majority of the acreage will serve as a buffer zone for noise and to provide the necessary security.

The legislation also contains extensive provisions for environmental protection of the Nevada desert, including a specially designated area of 18,000 acres set aside for benefit of the desert tortoise.